

2nd EGFAR Task Force Meeting

11/12/2009

ICRISAT, Patancheru (Hyderabad), India

Proceedings

Chair: Viviana Palmieri, IICA

Viviana Palmieri (FORAGRO/IICA) welcomed the participants.

At the beginning of the session she asked for clarifications on her role as Chair of the Task Force. Ajit Maru clarified that the role of the Chair is that of ensuring inclusiveness of the Regional Forums in the management of EGFAR, which is the web space of all the GFAR stakeholders and should be co-managed by the Regional Forums.

Viviana Palmieri observed that there is a lot to be done to enable better participation, the first obstacle for participation on the part of different RFs being the language barrier.

Valeria Pesce (GFAR) presented the report of the EGFAR activities since 2007. The report assessed EGFAR against the main objectives identified in the first EGFAR Task Force meeting held in September 2007 in Rome and against the action points identified in the GFAR Programmes of Work 2007-2008 and 2009-2010. The full review is attached as Annex 3. The presentation grouped the identified objectives under main areas and highlighted the main issues for each area:

- Integration on EGFAR of information from RAIS and NAIS: something has been achieved, like a common website search engine based on the Google CSE on EGFAR and a news and events aggregator both on EGFAR and on AgriFeeds, but more can be done using more specific standards or Web 2.0 technologies.
- Integraton of databases of institutions, projects, documents and experts: this requires an improvement of accessibility at the source level (some interoperability was made possible by agreements on custom protocols with the FAO NARS database, WISARD and Infosys).
The role of the GFAR Secretariat in this respect can be that of developing suitable standards with FAO, organizing technical workshops on interoperability and evaluating IM tools. The GFAR Secretariat should have an advisory role. Most of these activities within GFAR are now conducted under the CIARD umbrella. The EGFAR Task Force could become a member of the CIARD Content Management Task Force (CMTF).
- Implementation of the Web Ring: this objective has been achieved through the CIARD RING (Routemap to Information Gateways and Nodes), a registry of existing information services in ARD, indexed and described in a way that makes them more easily “exploitable” for building value-added integrated services. There has been a shift in the approach from the Web Ring to the CIARD RING: the Web Ring was an architecture of value-added services built on top of interoperable sources, while the CIARD RING for the moment is a directory/registry of existing services and information sources. It is therefore an infrastructure that is meant to facilitate the exploitation of interoperable sources and the building of value-added services.
- Collaboration with partners on standards and tools: this is happening within the CIARD CMTF.

- Strengthening the RAIS: some weaknesses in some RAIS websites in terms of communication tools and flexibility of information management were noticed during the GCARD regional e-consultations, therefore a stronger advisory role of EGFAR is needed. The work that GFAR is doing with FAO in evaluating IM tools is part of this advisory role.
- EGFAR for sharing experiences: such functionalities tested successfully during the regional e-consultations.

The presentation finally proposed a few issues for discussion:

- improving stakeholders' participation in EGFAR web space;
- improving the accessibility and the integration of information in Global ARD knowledge sharing;
- the need for better information management and the adoption of standards;
- the proposal of technical workshops on information management issues and suitable tools;
- contribution of the EGFAR Task Force to the CIARD RING.

A few questions followed the presentation: Viviana Palmieri commented on the proposal that the EGFAR TF could participate in the CIARD CMTF observing that they should also participate in the other CIARD Task Forces (Advocacy and Capacity building); Dady Demby asked some clarifications on the shift in approach from the Web Ring to the CIARD RING and he confirmed that also FARA has a strong interest in making existing databases like Infosys (which stores a lot of data from FARA) interoperable.

Ajit Maru related the experience of the regional e-consultations conducted in view of GCARD 2010: some of the Regional Forums did not have the means to conduct an electronic consultation and used the facilities offered by EGFAR, which means that the engines behind some of the RAIS have to be upgraded and standardized. He proposed a training programme for the RAIS managers who want to improve their systems.

Ajit Maru also invited all RAIS to share their feeds and contribute them to AgriFeeds as a first easy step to make information interoperable.

He then introduced the main challenge: how to make the Task Force more active?

Viviana Palmieri observed that the main difficulty is that all RAIS managers already have extra work and there is a strong need to prioritize. For example, the regional level has a higher priority for the RAIS than providing national information to the global level, which is one of the reasons why contributing national feeds to a global service is not perceived as a priority.

Dady Demby on the contrary said that FARA has always found feeds very useful for information sharing and that feeds produced at the national level are useful for FARA to monitor the national status in ICM4ARD. He also agreed that the GFAR Secretariat should help in issues related to the integration of databases and advice on tools, adding that also inter-regional cross-fertilization is important.

Ajit Maru commented on Viviana Palmieri's point regarding prioritization and lack of resources saying that exactly because the responsibility of the RAIS managers are going to increase (especially in view of the GCARD process, the CGIAR reform, CIARD etc.), the RAIS and the EGFAR Task Force will have to grow, will need resources and will have to ask for resources.

He concluded that agreeing on the things that the partners in the EGFAR Task Force want to do will help in asking for the necessary resources.

The meeting concluded with a Vote of Thanks to the Chair who was again requested unanimously to continue her function as Chair of the GFAR Task Force.

Annex 1

Agenda of the 2nd EGFAR Task Force meeting

Agenda of the 2nd EGFAR Task Force Meeting

11th December 2009

11:30 – 12:30

11:30 Welcome by the Chair

11:35 Presentation of the report on EGFAR from the GFAR Secretariat

12:00 Discussion and next steps

Annex 2

List of participants

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Annex 3

EGFAR review

EGFAR 2007-2009: A review

1. Background

EGFAR was planned and has been implemented in several progressive stages keeping up with changes in concepts and state of the art technology.

A previous review gives an overview and an assessment of EGFAR for the period 2002-2007.

This document aims at assessing EGFAR against the main objectives identified in the first EGFAR Task Force meeting held in September 2007 in Rome and considering the action points identified in the GFAR Programmes of Work 2007-2008 and 2009-2010.

The 2007 EGFAR Task Force meeting identified the following objectives for the EGFAR Task Force:

- The further enabling and strengthening of the EGFAR Web ring through various synergisms facilitating an improved access to the RAIS resources.
- Advocacy, capacity development and enabling integration and coherence of ARD information systems in collaboration with other major stakeholders involved in similar activities.
- The publication of the Bi-annual Global Status of ICM for ARD
- Developing EGFAR as a “marketplace” for sharing and exchanging tools, applications related to managing ARD related information.
- Work closely with all ARD stakeholders in developing new means to integrate and bring greater coherence to ARD information

The proceedings of the 1st EGFAR Task Force meeting also established the following tasks for the EGFAR platform:

- EGFAR should be a space for sharing information, experience (through experts) and knowledge in ICM, especially for the regional forums and ARD stakeholders.
- The information expected from EGFAR was value addition to information related to critical issues in ARD being discussed by GFAR stakeholders.
- EGFAR is also expected to contribute to integration of the databases available at regional and NARS levels.
- The collaborative activities of GFAR with FAO, CGIAR, Wageningen University and other ARD Institutions such as CIRAD, EIARD/Infosys, SIST in defining institutional metadata sets should be furthered and the standards, tools and applications etc be shared as soon as possible.

The GFAR Programmes of Work 2007-2008 and 2009-2010 expected the following actions to be taken specifically on EGFAR:

- The newly reengineered EGFAR Web space will be tested through use by stakeholders. Stakeholders will be encouraged to participate in the EGFAR Web space and be a part of EGFAR Web ring
- The technology generated in integrating the NARS-FAO-WAICENT database will be shared with regional forums, NARS information systems and other stakeholder groups in order to enhance cohesiveness and integration of ARD related databases available across the world.
- The GFAR Electronic Repository will be continuously updated during the year with GFAR documents
- The GFAR Newsletter will be published regularly electronically and in print.
- Development of the ARD RING
- To improve access to information and the ability of stakeholders to contribute to global agricultural knowledge;
- To develop regional platforms for agricultural information and learning systems.
- Sharing knowledge through the use of internet based tools and fostering debate on key issues on sharing and exchanging agricultural information and knowledge globally

2. Assessment of EGFAR

Appendix 1 details the EGFAR-related activities under the main identified objectives from 2007 till date.

Summary

This section gives a summary assessment of the achievements and weaknesses of EGFAR taking into consideration the main objectives identified in the 1st EGFAR Task Force meeting and the action points identified in the PoW 2009-2010.

Several objectives identified both in the EGFAR Task Force and in the PoWs 2007-2008 and 2009-2010 relate to improving the integration of information available at the RAIS and NAIS level, especially the integration of databases of institutions, projects, documents and experts. Some progress has been made in accessing contents in the RAIS websites through a common search engine based on the Google CSE and in aggregating news and events both on EGFAR and on AgriFeeds. Further progress in accessing more structured information like databases of institutions, projects etc. requires an improvement of accessibility at the source level. With this objective in mind, new standards are under development within the CIARD Content Management Task Force (CMTF) for managing information on institutions, projects and experts and facilitate its sharing. Standards for managing documents, news and events have been already available for a while but they have not been fully adopted at the RAIS and NAIS level.

In terms of new functionalities that make information more interoperable, new web 2.0 functionalities were added to EGFAR: new contents have been embedded from remote services (Flickr photos, Google Calendars, AgriFeeds) and new contents have been made available for embedding in other websites (specific and dynamic RSS feeds from the document repository, specific feeds for GCARD documents and regional e-consultations)

A related key recommendation was the implementation of the Web Ring, which was then conceived as an infrastructure for improved access to the RAIS resources. This concept has broadened in the context of CIARD, which in 2008 endorsed the CIARD RING as a framework for facilitating the interoperability between information services.

The CIARD RING (Routemap to Information Gateways and Nodes) consists of a registry of existing information services in ARD, indexed and described in a way that makes them more easily “exploitable” for building value-added integrated services. The RING was implemented by GFAR in 2009 and was launched in October 2009. It is available at www.ciardring.net.

The RING is an infrastructure for facilitating the interoperability between information services in that it features all the technical details of the services, especially those concerning the adoption of standards.

The idea behind this shift in the approach to the Ring is that the value-added services foreseen by the Web Ring cannot be built without an awareness of what others have done: which sources are available, how to tap into them, how to exploit their semantics. The RING, through a registry of existing ARD information services, orientates those working on information systems by: a) categorizing and interlinking the featured services according to criteria based on standards used, vocabulary used, technology used, protocols used, level of interoperability, etc.; and b) giving detailed instructions on how to interoperate the featured services.

Other recommendations concern the collaborative activities of GFAR with FAO, CGIAR, Wageningen University and other ARD Institutions regarding standards and tools. These activities have been continuously carried on, especially in the CIARD CMTF.

In particular, the issue of suitable tools for information management and sharing has come up recently in the CIARD CMTF and discussions are taking place on how to make a survey and an evaluation of tools and if and how CIARD could have an advisory role in this. The issue of tools is again related to the improvement of information sharing, as it has been noted that one of the obstacles to an effective sharing of information is the difficulty for most information systems to manage their information efficiently and to make it accessible, due especially to the lack of good tools.

Still regarding tools, it was recommended that EGFAR should also become a “marketplace” for sharing and exchanging tools and applications related to managing ARD related information.

One step in this direction was the creation of a section dedicated to tools in the Open Site on EGFAR, where users can share information and experiences about tools for ICM. This feature has not been used much so far.

However, there is a need for something more structured. A directory of tools,, following the approach adopted by the CIARD RING for services, is planned by CIARD, and it could become part of the CIARD RING or be published in the CIARD website.

Regarding the strengthening of the RAIS and their interoperability, some weaknesses in the APAARI, AARINENA and CACAARI websites and information systems, in terms of communication tools and flexibility of information management, were noticed on the occasion of the organization of the electronic consultations for GCARD 2010. In order to improve the systems, stronger collaboration is planned between the GFAR Secretariat and the above mentioned RAIS.

In particular, the CACAARI.RAIS website has been reorganized and a new “engine” for the website is now being implemented with support from GFAR-Secretariat.

The GFAR Secretariat’s role will be an advisory role, consisting especially of recommending suitable tools (and providing training if necessary) and best practices. Custom versions of the recommended tools may be provided by the Secretariat if needed.

Regarding EGFAR as a communication platform and the idea that “EGFAR should be a space for sharing information, experience (through experts) and knowledge in ICM, especially for the regional forums and ARD stakeholders”, these functionalities were tested successfully during the regional e-consultations: EGFAR hosted some of the electronic discussions, provided a platform for registration to the mailing lists and published feeds from the discussions and from the GCARD blog.:

One of the objectives established for EGFAR still requires time and depends much on participation on the part of experts and on the availability of resources, as the process cannot be automated: this is the value addition to information related to critical issues in ARD being discussed by GFAR stakeholders. One experiment in this direction has been the publicity given to the GCARD regional e-consultations: the GCARD blog and EGFAR have published regular summaries and quotations from the ongoing regional e-consultations, highlighting the key issues of the discussions.

As general maintenance and regular improvement and update of the website, during the last part of 2008 and in 2009 EGFAR underwent three major interventions.

- Re-styling
GFAR corporate image was completely renewed in 2008 and the website was subsequently revamped. The new website layout was completed by the end of 2008, while the re-writing of some texts and the addition of new sections took place in 2009.
- News management
The Newsletter section was modified in order to accommodate the new format of the “GFAR e-news”, the HTML email news sent at least once a week to all GFAR stakeholders and then published on the website. Also the News section was improved in order to a) accommodate also the new “GFAR e-features” announcements; b) provide a new separate section for job opportunities; c) aggregate contents from partner websites in the three sections of news, events and job opportunities.
- New GCARD 2010 section
A new section was added to the website for publishing information on the upcoming GCARD 2010 Conference in Montpellier and the overall GCARD process (<http://www.egfar.org/egfar/website/gcard>). This new section was designed as a sub-website of e-GFAR, with its own homepage and navigation. Also a blog (<http://gcardblog.wordpress.com/>) and a Twitter page (<http://twitter.com/gcard2010>) were created as a friendlier way to post updates and receive feedback and the flow of information between the three platforms has been established through the use of RSS feeds. A special section was created in the GCARD website to support the regional e-consultations, providing an overview of each regional consultation with updates from the blog and from the forums when available, links to the registration pages for each region for participating in the electronic discussions and documents produced for the regional consultations.
- IT support for the GCARD e-consultations
Particularly for the e-consultations in Asia Pacific, Central Asia and the Caucasus, Europe and West Asia and North Africa, GFAR provided IT support both in terms of web presence (discussion forums and publication of updates on the website – harvested from the blog and from the forums) and in terms of workflow (online registration forms for each region for participating in the electronic discussions, setup and automatic management of the mailing lists).

3. Key issues to be discussed at the EGFAR Taskforce meeting

- EGFAR as a larger GFAR E-Space: improving stakeholders' participation
- GFAR Partners participation through EGFAR in global ARD information and knowledge sharing: improving the accessibility and the integration of information:
 - the need for better information management and the adoption of standards
 - technical workshops on information management issues and suitable tools
- EGFAR and the CIARD RING

Annex 3 - Appendix 1

How the objectives identified by the 1st EGFAR Task Force meeting have been implemented

Objective	Achievement since 2007
<p>The further enabling and strengthening of the EGFAR Web ring through various synergisms facilitating an improved access to the RAIS resources.</p>	<p>Achieved:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Information from the RAIS websites can be accessed from a common search engine in EGFAR - RSS feeds from the RAIS websites can be accessed from EGFAR and from AgriFeeds - The EGFAR Web ring has become the CIARD RING - The CIARD RING has been launched <p>Not achieved:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Structured information from the RAIS websites (databases of organizations, projects, experts, documents) cannot be accessed from a common search engine
<p>Advocacy, capacity development and enabling integration and coherence of ARD information systems in collaboration with other major stakeholders involved in similar activities.</p>	<p>Several regional workshops have been organized in 2008 and 2009 under the ICM4ARD program (see ICM4ARD review) These activities are now conducted under the CIARD umbrella.</p>
<p>The publication of the Bi-annual Global Status of ICM for ARD</p>	<p>Achieved:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The GFAR Newsletter in 2008 and the GFAR e-news in 2009 have featured an “ICM corner” - Peter Ballantyne's paper on “...” gives an overview of the status of ICM for ARD as of 2007. <p>Not achieved:</p> <p>a regular bi-annual publication covering the global status of ICM</p>
<p>Developing EGFAR as a “marketplace” for sharing and exchanging tools, applications related to managing ARD related information.</p>	<p>EGFAR features a section under “Have your say” that is called Open Site, where users can share information and experiences about tools for ICM. This feature has not been used much so far.</p> <p>Directory of tools planned by the CIARD Content Management Task Force (CMTF)</p>
<p>Work closely with all ARD stakeholders in developing new means to integrate and bring greater coherence to ARD information</p>	<p>This objective is pursued by working in the CIARD Content Management Task Force (CMTF), where EGFAR is represented by Valeria Pesce:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - collaboration in the definition of new standards - participation in discussions on suitable tools for ICM - collaboration in the production of Pathways

Specific Objectives	Achievement till 2007
<p>EGFAR should be a space for sharing information, experience (through experts) and knowledge in ICM, especially for the regional forums and ARD stakeholders.</p>	<p>Achieved:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The “Have your say” section of EGFAR allows to post contents and to conduct electronic discussions - EGFAR was successfully used for the GCARD regional e-consultations <p>Not achieved:</p> <p>regular participation. Participation is usually limited to time-bound discussions.</p>
<p>The information expected from EGFAR was value addition to information related to critical issues in ARD being discussed by GFAR stakeholders.</p>	<p>The GCARD blog and EGFAR have published regular summaries and quotations from the ongoing regional e-consultations.</p> <p>Actual value addition has been an area of weakness.</p>
<p>EGFAR is also expected to contribute to integration of the databases available at regional and NARS levels.</p>	<p>This has not been achieved.</p> <p>The databases available at regional and NARS levels are not accessible enough to allow integration. Technical workshops should be conducted on how to improve the accessibility of information.</p>
<p>The collaborative activities of GFAR with FAO, CGIAR, Wageningen University and other ARD Institutions such as CIRAD, EIARD/Infosys, SIST in defining institutional metadata sets should be furthered and the standards, tools and applications etc be shared as soon as possible.</p>	<p>These collaborative activities have been conducted in the CIARD CMTF: new standards have been defined and there have been discussions on tools for ICM.</p> <p>A technical session on tools for ICM is being organized by the CMTF in the IAALD annual congress in 2010 in Montpellier.</p>